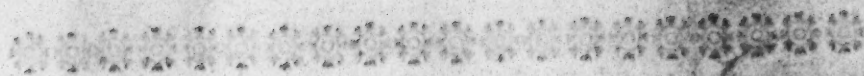




A N
E S S A Y
O N
W I T.



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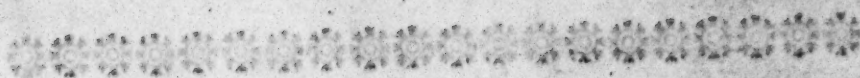


MA

Y A 2 2 E



T I W



[Price Six-pence.]

AN
ESSAY
ON
WIT:

To which is annexed,
A DISSERTATION on Antient and
Modern HISTORY.

Stultitiâ caruisse.

Sapientia prima
HOR. Epist. I. Lib. I.



L O N D O N:

Printed for T. Lewnds, Bookseller, at the Bible and Crown,
in Exeter-Change, in the Strand, 1748.

ESSAYS

WILLIAM

A DISCOURSE
ON THE HISTORY



LONDON:
Printed by J. Smith, in Strand, 1753.



A N
E S S A Y
O N
W I T.



Gentleman who had some Knowledge in the human Heart, was consulted about a Tragedy which was going to be acted: He answer'd that there was so much Wit in the Piece that he doubted of its Success. — At hearing such a Judgment, a Man will immediately cry out, What! is Wit then a Fault,

a Fault, at a Time when every Body aims at having it, when nobody writes but to shew he has it; when the Publick applauds even false Thoughts, provided they are shining! Yes, 'twill doubtless be applauded the first Day, and grow tiresom the next.

That which they call Wit, is sometimes a new Simile, sometimes a fine Allusion: Here 'tis the Abuse of a Word which presents itself in one Sense, and is understood in another; there a delicate Relation between two uncommon Ideas: 'Tis an extraordinary Metaphor; 'tis something which in an Object does not at first present itself, but nevertheless is in it; 'tis the Art, to unite two Things which were far from one another; to separate two which seem to be joined, or to set them in Opposition; 'tis the Art, of expressing but half the Thought and leaving the other to be found out. In short, I'd tell all the different Ways of shewing Wit, if I knew of any more.

But all these Brightnesses (and I speak not of the false ones) agree not, or very seldom agree with a serious Work, which ought to be interesting. The Reason of it is, that 'tis then
the

the Author that appears, and the Publick will see no body but the Hero. Moreover the Hero is always either in a Passion, or in Danger. Danger, and the Passions seek not Expressions of Wit. *Priam* and *Hecuba* don't make Epigrams, when their Childrens Throats are cut and *Troy* in Flames : — *Dido* does not sigh in Madrigals, when she flies to the Pile upon which she's going to sacrifice herself : — *Demosthenes* has no Prettinesses, when he animates the *Athenians* to War ; if he had, he'd be a Rhetorician indeed, instead of which he's a Statesman.

If *Pyrrhus* was always to express himself in this Stile :

————— 'Tis true,
*My Sword has often reek'd in Phrygian Blood,
 And carry'd Havock through your Royal Kindred :
 But you, fair Princess, amply have aveng'd
 Old Priam's vanquish'd House : And all the Woes,
 I brought on them, fall short of what I suffer.*

This Character wou'd not touch at all : 'Twou'd soon be perceiv'd, that true Passion seldom makes Use of such Comparisons, and that there is very little Proportion between the
 real

real Fires which consumed *Troy*, and the amorous Fires of *Pyrrhus*; between the Havock he made amongst *Andromache's* Kindred and the Cruelty she shews him.

Chamont says, in speaking of *Monimia* :

*You took her up a little tender Flower,
Just sprouted on a Bank, which the next Frost
Had nipt; and, with a careful loving Hand,
Transplanted her into your own fair Garden,
Where the Sun always shines: There long she
flourish'd,
Grew sweet to Sense, and lovely to the Eye;
Till at the last, a cruel Spoiler came,
Cropt this fair Rose, and rifled all its Sweetness,
Then cast it, like a loathsome Weed, away.*

This Thought has a prodigious *Eclat*: There's a great deal of Wit in it, and even an Air of Simplicity that imposes upon one. We all see, that these Verses, pronounced with the Art and Enthusiasm of a good Actor never fail of Applause; but I think we may also see, that the Tragedy of the *Orphan* wrote entirely in this Taste would never have lived long.

In

In effect, why should *Chamont* make such a long-winded Simile almost in the Height of Rage for the Ruin of his Sister? Is that natural? Does not the Poet here quite hide his Hero to shew himself?

This brings into my Mind the absurd Custom of finishing the Acts of almost all our modern Tragedies with a Simile; surely in a great Crisis of Affairs, in a Council, in a violent Passion of Love or Wrath, in a pressing Danger, Princes, Ministers, Heroes or Lovers, should not make Poetical Comparisons. — Even *Marcia's* (or rather Mr. *Addison's*) beautiful Simile at the End of the first Act of *Cato*, is scarcely to be forgiven.

What then would a Work be, that was filled with far-fetched and Problematick Thoughts? How infinitely superior to all such dazzling Ideas, are these simple and natural Words of *Monimia* to her angry Brother?

*Look kindly on me then. I cannot bear
Severity; it daunts, -and does amaze me:*

*My Heart's so tender, should you charge me rough,
I should but weep, and answer you with sobbing.
But use me gently, like a loving Brother,
And search through all the Secrets of my Soul.*

Or these of Brutus, when he receives the
News of his Wife's Death :

Brutus. *Now, as you are a Roman, tell me true.*
Messala. *Then like a Roman bear the Truth I
tell ;*

*For certain she is dead, and by strange
manner.*

Brutus. *Why farewell Portia. — We must die,
Messala.*

*With meditating that she must die once,
I have the Patience to endure it now.*

Or these noble ones of Titinius, when he
stabs himself :

By your leave Gods — this is a Roman's Part.

It is not that which is called Wit, but what
is sublime and noble that makes true Beauty.

I have purposely chose these Examples from
good

good Authors, that they may be the more striking; and I speak not of those Points and Quibbles, whose Impropropriety is easily perceiv'd. There is no one but laughs when *Hotspur* says,

*Why, what a deal of candied Courtesie
This fawning Greyhound then did proffer me!
Look, when his infant Fortune came to Age,
And gentle Harry Percy — and kind Cousin —
The Devil take such Cozeners. —*

Shakespear found the Stage, and all the People of his Days, infected with these Puerillities, and he very well knew how (though perhaps he never read it in *Epicætetus*)

Τὴν αὐτὴν ἐπέλθουσιν Συνάρμους τοῖς γινομένοις.

to attune, or harmonize his Mind to the Things which happen.

I now remember one of these shining Strokes, which I have seen quoted in several Works of Taste, and even in the Treatise of Studies by the late Mr. *Rollin*. This *Morceau* is taken from the beautiful Funeral Oration of the great *Turenne*: The whole Piece is very fine, but

it seems to me that the Stroke I am speaking of should not have been made Use of by a Bishop.
— This is it :

“ O Sovereigns ! Enemies of *France*, ye live,
“ and the Spirit of Christian Charity forbids me
“ to wish your Deaths, &c. — But ye live,
“ and I mourn in this Pulpit the Death of a
“ virtuous Captain, whose Intentions were
“ pure, &c. —

An Apostrophe in this Taste would have been very proper at *Rome* in the Civil Wars, after the Assassination of *Pompey* ; or at *London* after the Death of *Charles* the First. But is it decent, in a Pulpit, to wish for the Death of the Emperor, the King of *Spain*, and the Electors ; to put them in Balance with the General of a King's Army, who is their Enemy ? Or ought the Intentions of a Captain, which can be no other than to serve his Prince, to be compared with the Politick Interests of the crown'd Heads against which he serves ? What would be said of a *Frenchman*, who had wished for the Death of the King of *England*, because of the Loss of the Chevalier *Belleisle*, whose Intentions were pure ?

For

For what Reason has this Passage been always praised by the Criticks? 'Tis because the Figure is in itself beautiful and pathetick, but they did not examine into the Congruity and Bottom of the Thought.

I return to my Paradox — That all these shining Strokes, to which they give the Name of Wit, never ought to be introduced into great Works made to instruct or to move; I'll even say they ought not to be found in Odes for Musick. Musick expresses Passions, Sentiments and Images: but what are the Concords that can be giv'n an Epigram? *Dryden* was sometimes negligent, but he was always natural.

In a Sermon of Doctor *South*, where he speaks of Man's Rectitude and Freedom from Sin before the Fall, are seen these Words:

“ We were not born crooked, we learnt these
“ Windings and Turnings of the Serpent.

I remember to have heard this Passage admired by several People: but who does not see that the Motions, *viz.* the Windings and Turnings

ings of the Serpent's Body are here confounded with those of its Heart : and that at best 'tis but a mere Point and Pleasantry.

Certainly there's a great Impropriety in putting any kind of Smartness into Pieces of such a Nature as Dr. *South's* ; but what is still worse, we generally find these Smartnesses to be quite vague and superficial ; they don't enter, but only play upon the Surface of the Soul.

Had a certain polite Author been a Cotemporary of the Doctor's, he'd have told him that

Τὴν μὲν Ἑπιδόην διαφθεῖρειν γέλωι, τὸν δὲ γέλωι σπυδῇ.

Humour is the only Test of Gravity ; and Gravity of Humour. For a Subject which will not bear Raillery, is suspicious ; and a Jest which will not bear a serious Examination, is certainly false Wit.

These Sports of the Imagination, these Finesses, these Conceits, these glittering Strokes, these Gaieties, these little cut Sentences, these ingenious Prodigalities, which are lavished away
in

in our Times, agree with none but little Works. The Front of *St Paul's Church* is simple and majestick. A Cabinet may with Propriety enough contain little Ornaments. Have as much Wit as you will, or you can, in a Madrigal, in little light Verses, in the Scene of a Comedy, which is neither passionate or simple, in a Compliment, in a little Story, in a Letter where you would be merry yourself to make your Friends so.

Spencer was very well acquainted with this Art. In his *Fairy Queen*, you find hardly any thing but what is sublime and full of Imagery : but in his detached Pieces, such as the Hymn in Honour of Beauty, The Fate of the Butterfly, *Britain's Ida*, &c. he gave a Loose to his Wit and Delicacy. The following Verses are Part of the Description of *Venus* asleep, in the last mention'd Poem :

*Her full large Eyes, in jetty-black array'd,
Proud Beauty not confin'd to red and white,
But oft herself in black more rich display'd;
Both Contraries did yet themselves unite,
To make one Beauty in different Delight :*

*A thousand Loves sate playing in each Eye,
And smiling Mirth kissing fair Courtesy,
By sweet Persuasion wan a bloodless Victory.*

*Her Lips most happy each in other's Kisses,
From their so wish'd Imbracements seldom parted,
Yet seem'd to blush at such their wanton Bliss;
But when sweet Words their joining Sweets dis-*
parted,

To the Ear a dainty Musick they imparted:

*Upon them fitly sate delightful Smiling,
A thousand Souls with pleasing Stealth be-*
guiling:

*Ah that such shews of Joys shou'd be all
Joys exiling!*

*Lower two Breasts stand all their Beauties bearing,
Two Breasts as smooth and soft; — but ah alas!
Their smoothest Softness far exceeds comparing:
More smooth and soft; — but nought that ever was,
Where they are first, deserves the second Place:*

*Yet each as soft, and each as smooth as
other;*

*But when thou first try'st one, and then
the other,*

*Each softer seems than each, and each than
each seems smoother.*

These

These Lines (pretty as they are) would be unsufferable in a large and serious Work, nay there are some People who tax them with being too extravagant even for the Poem where they stand; and in truth, their warmest Admirer can say no more than this:

Nequeo Monstrare, & Sentio tantum.

So far am I from reproaching *Waller* with putting too much Wit in his Poems; that on the contrary, I have found too little, though he continually aims at it. They say that Dancing Masters never make a handsome Bow, because they take too much Pains. I think *Waller* is often in this Case; his best Verses are studied; one finds he quite tires himself to find that which presents itself so naturally to *Rocheſter*, *Congreve*, and to so many more, who with all the Ease in the World, write these Bagatelles better than *Waller* did with Labour.

I know it signifies very little to the Affairs of the World, whether *Waller* was or was not a great Genius; whether he only made a few pretty Things, or that all his Verses may stand

for Models. But we who love the Arts, carry an attentive Eye on that which to the rest of the World is a Matter of mere Indifference. Good Taste is for us in Literature, what it is for Women in Dress; and provided we don't make our Opinions an Affair of Party, I think we may boldly say, that there are few excellent Things in *Waller*, and that *Cowley* might be easily reduced to a few Pages.

It is not that we would deprive them of their Reputation; 'tis only to inquire strictly what brought them that Reputation which is so much respected; and what are the true Beauties which made their Faults be overlooked. It must be known what ought to be followed in their Works, and what avoided; this is the true Fruit of a deep Study in the Belles Lettres; it is this that *Horace* did, when he examined *Lucilius* critically. *Horace* got Enemies by it, but he enlightened his Enemies themselves.

This Desire of shining, and to say in a new Manner what others have said before, is the Foundation of new Expressions, as well as of far-fetched Thoughts.

He

He that cannot shine by a Thought will distinguish himself by a Word. This is their Reason for substituting Placid for Peaceful, Joyous for Joyful, Meandring for Winding; and a hundred more Affectations of the same kind. If they were to go on at this Rate, the Language of *Shakespear*, *Milton*, *Dryden*, *Addison* and *Pope*, would soon become quite superannuated. And why avoid an Expression in use, to introduce one which says precisely the same Thing? A new Word is never pardonable, but when it is absolutely necessary, intelligible and sonorous; they are forc'd to make them in Physics: A new Discovery, or a new Machine demands a new Word. But do they make new Discoveries in the human Heart? Is there any other Greatness than that of *Shakespear* and *Milton*? Are there any other Passions than those that have been handled by *Otway* and *Dryden*? Is there any other Evangelic Moral than that of Dr. *Tillotson*? *Are most certain*

Those who accuse the *English* Language of not being copious enough, do, in Truth, find a Sterility, but 'tis in themselves. *is, it is, m, T*

Rem Verba sequuntur.

When one is thoroughly struck with an Idea, when a Man of Sense, fill'd with Warmth, is in full Possession of his Thought, it comes from him all ornamented with suitable Expressions, as *Minerva* sprang out, compleatly arm'd, from the Head of *Jupiter*.

In short, the Conclusion of all this is, that you must never seek for far-fetch'd Thoughts, Conceits or Expressions; and that the Art of all great Works, is to reason well, without making many Arguments; to paint accurately, without Painting all; to move, without always exciting the Passions.

New



New CONSIDERATIONS UPON HISTORY.



PERHAPS it will soon happen in the Manner of writing History, what has already happened in Physics. New Discourses have abolished ancient Systems. One wou'd be glad to be acquainted with Mankind by that interesting Detail, which now makes the Basis of natural Philosophy.

People begin to pay little regard to the Story of *Curtius's* closing a large Trench, by flinging him-

himself and Horse to the Bottom ; they laugh at the Buckler's descending from the Skies ; and at all those fine Gifts which the Gods presented so liberally to Mankind ; at the Vestals, who set a Vessel afloat with a Girdle ; and at all the Heap of celebrated Nonsense which almost fills the Ancient History. They are not more contented, when in his History, a famous Critick talks seriously of King *Nabis*, who gave his Wife to the Embraces of those who brought him Money, and put those who refus'd it him, into the Arms of a beautiful Doll, exactly like the Queen, and arm'd with Iron Spikes under its Stays. They laugh when they see so many Authors repeat one after the other ; that the famous *Otton*, Archbishop of *Mayence*, was attacked and eat up by an Army of Rats ; that a Field of Corn ran away down a Hill, and covered another Man's Ground ; ✕ that the Devil carried away half a Church in Sermon time, without hurting one of the Congregation. — Prodigies, Predictions, fiery Or-dials, &c. are at present in the same Rank with the Stories of *Herodotus*.

I speak here of Modern History, where we find

find neither Dolls embracing Courtiers, nor Bishops eat up by Rats.

They take great Care to tell what Day a Battle was fought (and with reason). They print the Treaties at length, they describe the Pomp of a Coronation, the Ceremony at the Installation of a Knight of the *Bath*, and even the Entry of an Ambassador, in which they forget neither his *Swiss* nor his Footboys. It's proper there should be Archives of all, that they may be consulted in case of need ; and I now consider all great Books, as Dictionaries ; but after having read three or four thousand Descriptions of Battles, and the Tenour of a few hundreds of Treaties, I find that at the Bottom I am not a bit the wiser. I here learn nothing but Events. I am no better acquainted with the *English* and *French* by the Battle of *Cressy*, than I know the *Tartars* and *Turks* by the Defeat which *Tamerlane* gave *Bajazet*. I see in one of our best Histories, two or three Pages filled with the Disputes of Historians, whether *Richard* the Third, was a tall or a short Man, whether he was well shaped, or that one of his Shoulders was higher than the other. At the Time of King *Charles* of *Spain's* coming to
Lon-

London, I see an Historian very particular in relating the Manner of that Prince's being introduced to Queen *Anne*, and how genteely he saluted the Maids of Honour. This is a great deal for my Curiosity; very little for my Instruction.

There are Books which learn me the true or false Anecdotes of a Court. Whoever has seen Courts, or has had a Desire to see them, is as greedy of these illustrious Bagatelles, as a Country Wench to know the News of her little Village. At the Bottom one is just the same Thing, and has just the Merit of the other. — They entertained themselves in the Time of *Charles* the Second, with the Anecdotes of *James* the First: — They talked of my Lord *Rochester* in the first Years of Queen *Anne's* Reign. All these little Trifles live for a Generation or two, and then die for ever.

For these Trifles, however, they neglect some Parts of Knowledge of a much more sensible and durable Nature. I should like to know (for Instance) what was the Strength of a Nation before a War; and whether that War had augmented or diminished it: Was *Spain* richer before

before the Conquest of the new World than it is now? How much better it was peopled in the Time of *Charles* the Fifth, than in that of *Philip* the Fourth: Why *Amsterdam* two hundred Years ago, scarcely contained 20,000 Souls, and why there are now 200,000 Inhabitants in it? How much better *England* is peopled now, than it was in the Reign of *Henry* the Eighth? Whether the Author of the *Persian* Letters is not wrong in saying, there is a Scarcity of Men upon Earth, and that it is very thin of Inhabitants in comparison of what it was two thousand Years ago? *Rome*, it's true, then contained more Citizens than it does now: I confess that *Alexandria* and *Carthage* were great Cities; but *Grand Cairo*, *Constantinople*, *London*, *Amsterdam* and *Paris* did not then exist. There were three hundred Nations in *Gaul*; but those three hundred were not equal to the modern *French*, either in Number of Men, or in Industry. *Germany* was then a Forest; and there are now a Hundred wealthy Cities upon it.

It looks as if the Spirit of Criticism, wearied
D with

with lashing Particulars, had turned its Spite upon the whole Universe. They are ever crying out that the World degenerates, and insist moreover, that it grows thin of People. In a few Years they may really know how *Europe* is inhabited; for almost in every great City, they give the Public the Number of Births at the End of the Year; and by the accurate and sure Rule which an ingenuous and indefatigable *Dutch* Gentleman has lately given the World, we may know the Number of Inhabitants by the Number of Births. There already is one Object of the Curiosity of a Man, who would read History like a Patriot and a Philosopher. And he'll be far from letting this Piece of Knowledge bound his Curiosity. He will sedulously enquire what has been the radical Vice and reigning Virtue of a Nation? Why it has been powerful or weak at Sea; how, and to what Degree it has enriched itself in a Century: The Registers of the Exportations will inform him: He would know how Arts, how Manufactures were established; he will follow their Passage and Return from one Country to another. And the Change in
Man-

Manners and in the Laws will be his grand Object. By this means one might know the History of Men, instead of knowing a little Part of the History of Kings and Courts.

'Tis in vain that I read the Annals of *England*; our Historians are all silent on this Head.

There is none of them have had for Device :

Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto.

And I cannot help thinking that these useful Parts of Knowledge should be artfully incorporated with the Chain of Events.

I believe this is the only Way of writing modern History like a true Politician, and a true Philosopher. To treat of ancient History is to compile some Truths with a thousand Lies. This Sort of History is perhaps no other Ways useful than as Fable is, by great Events, which furnish perpetual Subject for our Pictures, Poems, Conversation, and from which they draw some Pieces of Morality. We shou'd know the Exploits of *Alexander*, as they know the Labours of *Hercules*.

In short, ancient History seems to me, with regard to the modern, what antient Medals are in Comparifon with the current Coin : The first remain in Cabinets, & the fecond circulates in the Univerfe, for the Commerce of Mankind.

x But not merely & only as Curiofitys, but to difcover & prove ancient Facts. yet his notion of what fhould chiefly be the Subject of History, is juft.

The E N D.



